Press Release

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Lake Mendocino Water Supply Projected to Reach Unprecedented Low Levels

Agency seeks 10-15% reduction in water demand through voluntary water conservation efforts

Santa Rosa, CA – The Sonoma County Water Agency today projected that Lake Mendocino may reach historically low water supply levels as early as this September. According to the Agency, unless significant rainfall occurs this spring, or water use is reduced, water levels in Lake Mendocino will drop to about 10,000 acre-feet. The last time Lake Mendocino reached similar water levels was during the 1976 drought. Lake Mendocino water storage is currently about 69,000 acre-feet. Water storage has been falling by 200-300 acre-feet per day for the past several weeks as the Agency releases water to maintain state-required minimum streamflows. The Agency is seeking to reduce urban and agricultural water demand by 10 to 15 percent by calling on municipal customers and the agricultural community to immediately implement voluntary water conservation efforts.

Lake Mendocino water plays a significant role in providing drinking water to about 750,000 residents in portions of Mendocino, Sonoma and Marin counties, habitat for threatened Chinook salmon, and an array of recreational opportunities both in Lake Mendocino and along the Russian River.

"We are taking a proactive role in educating the public, agricultural community, and our water contractors about these low water supply projections released," said Agency Director and Sonoma County Supervisor Tim Smith. "Now is the time for everyone to step up water conservation efforts."

Projected Lake Mendocino water supply levels are based on the lack of rain, reduced water flows from PG&E's Potter Valley Project, and demand from agricultural and Sonoma, Marin and Mendocino County urban water users.

Lack of Rain: Rainfall in the Agency's service area is about sixty percent of normal this year. Although the recent showers have been refreshing, weather forecasts indicate no major storm systems approaching the region within the month. Last year's rainfall has played a vital role in providing this year's water supply.

"The unusually dry springs we have experienced in recent years have made it difficult to fill Lake Mendocino to capacity and may be due to global warming," said Chris Murray, principal engineer.

Potter Valley Project Flow Reductions: Water flows into Lake Mendocino from the Potter Valley Project have been reduced by thirty-three percent this year. The Potter Valley Project diverts Eel River water through a Mendocino County powerhouse owned and operated by

PG&E into the upper Russian River Basin, and is the source of most of the summer flow in the East Branch Russian River. In 2004, federal regulatory agencies ordered a new water flow regime for the Potter Valley Project. This new regime changed the minimum and maximum stream flow requirements for the East Branch Russian River.

Agricultural and Urban Water Demand: Nearly sixty thousand acres of agricultural land is irrigated with water from the upper Russian River. Agricultural irrigation normally increases as temperatures rise and dry weather holds during the summer months. Urban water demand also increases during the summer months due to outdoor watering. Combined, both agricultural and urban water demand will further strain the already low water supply from Lake Mendocino and the upper Russian River.

The Agency will immediately begin meeting with state and federal officials to address the concerns about the projection and associated risks. The Agency will also schedule public workshops in the coming months to begin the dialogue with stakeholders necessary to develop amendments to State Water Board Decision 1610. As the local sponsor for both the Warm Springs and Coyote Valley Dams, the Agency has the right to store and release water from the water supply pools of both reservoirs. The Agency must however meet minimum required flows in the Russian River set by the State Water Resources Control Board in 1986 when it issued its Decision 1610. Under Decision 1610, the Agency has been required to maintain stream flows above 185 cubic feet per second (cfs) at a gauging station near Healdsburg.

At the same time when Lake Mendocino levels are projected to hit approximately 10,000 acre-feet, Chinook salmon will begin to migrate and spawn in the upper Russian River.

"Due to the low level of water released in the upper Russian River, migration and spawning of Chinook salmon will be carefully monitored to avoid any negative impacts," said Sean White, senior environmental specialist.

The Agency monitors fish passing at its inflatable rubber dam through two fish ladders near Wohler Bridge upstream from Guerneville on the Russian River. In 2006, about 4,500 Chinook salmon were in the upper Russian River at the same time the projection indicates low water levels in Lake Mendocino this year.

"By conserving water today, we can reduce the amount of water that is being used for watering lawns, and instead use that water for Chinook salmon that need the water to survive," said Agency Director and Sonoma County Supervisor Paul Kelley.
Water conservation tips, programs and rebates are available through local water suppliers and the Agency's website at www.sonomacountywater.org.

About Lake Mendocino:
Lake Mendocino is located three miles northeast of the City of Ukiah and is the major feature of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Coyote Valley Dam Project. Lake Mendocino is impounded by Coyote Valley Dam, located on the East Fork of the Russian River, 0.8 mile upstream of the East Fork Russian River's confluence with the Russian River. Coyote Valley Dam is a rolled earth embankment. Lake Mendocino began storing water in 1959.

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Sonoma County Water Agency provides water supply, flood protection and sanitation services for portions of Sonoma and Marin counties. Visit us at www.sonomacountywater.org.